



National Association of Conservation Districts



Association of Texas Soil and Water Conservation Districts

Testimony
Of
Barry Mahler
On behalf of the
Association of Texas Soil and Water Conservation Districts
and the
National Association of Conservation Districts
Before the
Senate Agriculture Committee
September 8, 2006

Mr. Chairman, good morning, I am Barry Mahler, President of the Association of Texas Soil and Water Conservation Districts and a farmer from Iowa Park, Texas. I have served as a conservation district director in Wichita County for 25 years. I also serve on the Wichita County FSA committee and as secretary of the board of the Wichita County Farm Bureau.

I own and operate a 1500-acre wheat and cotton farm in the Rolling Plains of Texas and also run stocker cattle on wheat pasture and 400 acres of native and improved grass. My farms all currently operate under a conservation plan and have seen vast improvements over the years from participation in programs such as Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) and the old Great Plains Conservation program. My home place is a great success story of conservation in Texas. When my father purchased it in 1963, it was in a state of great disrepair with problems of erosion that dated back to the dust bowl that had not been corrected since. Through cooperation with the Soil Conservation Service (now Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)) and a Great Plains conservation contract the farm was brought back to a productive state and has continued to improve in productivity through the years. My testimony today will address farm legislation as a whole with some thoughts as to how we might proceed as an industry, with conservation not as a side line item but a key tool for producers to use to accomplish

sustainability, productivity and profitability.

As we look to the development of the 2007 Farm Bill, I think we must look at the successes of the 2002 legislation as well as the areas where we can do better. If we were told that we had an unlimited budget to accomplish our goals the task would be simple. Since we do have to live within a budget, hard decisions will have to be made.

The 2002 Farm Bill was a major move forward for conservation in this country. It offered a balanced group of programs and brought many resources with which to carry them out. The conservation title grew with the 2002 legislation and brought significant funding and technical assistance to landowners all over the United States. This commitment has allowed producers to protect the soil and water that is so vital to their sustainability in the industry and vital to the ability of this country to provide for every citizen into the future. I believe that our successes in conservation, whether they be the programs of the 2002 Farm Bill or programs from the past, they have all been successful due to the involvement of voluntary conservation efforts by conservation districts across this great country. I think the facts will show that conservation districts have been the perfect link between landowner, producer and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to accomplish great things in the past and move to new levels in the future. The relationship of conservation districts and the USDA has provided a strong and lasting partnership. The work done by NRCS and conservation districts continues to be a model for the rest of the world of a public-private effort to protect the environment and advance our ability to feed the people of the United States and many more around the world.

I feel it is important to remind all of us that we are coming off of a couple of crop years in which we have had record or near record production of corn and cotton on a shrinking number of acres. The American farmer has accomplished this while reducing soil erosion. Producing more from less acres proves what we have always believed to be true, "Conservation does not cost it pays".

A recent report from the Economic Research Service (ERS) reports that of the 2.3 billion acres in the United States, agricultural land make up 52 percent of the mix. Grassland, pasture and range make up two thirds of the agricultural lands. From 1997 to 2002, cropland decreased by three percent while urban and rural residential increased by 29 percent. The fact our agricultural land is shrinking not growing at a time when our industry is expected to feed, clothe and now provide energy for a world with growing demands. We must take every measure to protect our working lands. We are talking about more than just sustaining a life style for the citizens of this country we are talking about the basic security of our country. I think history will show that more wars have been fought over the ability of a country to feed its people than any other reason other than religious differences.

Saying that we must protect the resources that feed us is an overstatement of the obvious. A body would be hard pressed to find anyone who would disagree with that goal. The question is, how do we accomplish that goal within the restraints of a budget? To answer that, lets take a look at what is working.

For more than 60 years all across the United States, nearly 3000 conservation districts have been helping people to conserve soil, water, trees and, wildlife. The mission of those conservation districts continues to be to coordinate assistance from all available sources, local, state and national to develop locally driven solutions to protect natural resources. The efforts of districts include working with 2.3 million land managers with efforts to touch more than 778 million acres of land. Districts support voluntary, incentive-based programs that provide both financial and technical assistance to guide landowners in the adoption of conservation practices.

The development of new programs and continuation of successful ones from the past is a very important consideration for the Farm Bill for 2007. There is no area of conservation that is more important than technical assistance. Technical assistance is the backbone of the program and offers the engineering and expertise that allows the NRCS to work with districts, landowners and agencies at the local and state level to address resource concerns. Funding for technical assistance allows NRCS and district employs to meet with landowners, see their operation and help with strategies to address individual resource needs.

Producers need quality technical assistance to maximize the effectiveness of the financial assistance they receive. Even outside of the cost share programs provided in the Farm Bill many producers rely on technical help to ensure that they are putting quality practices on the land. Availability of technical assistance is a limiting factor in program delivery and without adequate funding the full benefits of conservation programs and practice adoption cannot be realized.

Instead of taking time to address all of the conservation programs that are available through the Farm Bill, I would like to address some of the programs with which I have worked. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) has been widely successful across the country, and very well received here in Texas. Even with the substantial increase in funding provided by the 2002 Farm Bill, the demand continues to exceed the available dollars. The key component in making EQIP so successful is the locally led working groups ability to set the priorities of the program. In my own district we have seen attendance and participation in the planning meetings continue to grow each year as more and more producers and land owners realize that they do have a say in how the program will be applied in the local area. We have been able to "pick up the slack" in some areas of conservation that we have not been able to concentrate on in prior years. The program is very successful at putting conservation on the ground. As good as EQIP is, it is necessary to have adequate personnel for technical assistance to carry out the projects and see that they are administered in a way to solve problems and maintain effectiveness well into the future. The main components of EQIP after adequate funding is locally led priorities and technical assistance.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) has long been thought of as the main conservation program of the Farm Bill. Even though there is limited participation in my local area in CRP we all reap the benefits. Consider the fact that we are now in a drought

cycle that rivals and even surpasses the drought of the dust bowl era and we are not seeing the massive loss of topsoil that plagued the plains. It is dry and the wind blows, however we don't see the neighboring counties blow by. This is due to good conservation practices including but not limited to the Conservation Reserve Program. I realize that the CRP is maturing with many lands due to come out of the program in the next few years. It is always controversial for the government to idle private lands with program payments but the fact is the market continues to tell us that the production from these fragile lands is not needed right now.

Think about the CRP in another way. It is actually a reserve of productivity. A lesson should be learned from the energy crisis that is upon this country now. We should be pleased as a nation to have thousands of acres of productive land ready to be called upon in case of a shortage of food and fiber due to weather, terrorism or just increase in demand. The CRP holds land in reserve that could be brought to production, some in as little as a few months to add security to this nation.

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program or WHIP works with landowners through cost share to increase wildlife habitat with priorities on threatened and endangered species. This is a program that has been embraced by mainstream agriculture as well as areas considered "non-traditional, including municipalities and areas in the urban/rural interface. This program broadens the scope of the Farm Bill conservation programs to address increasing pressures on farmers and ranchers from the Endangered Species Act.

The Conservation Security Program or CSP is a provision of the Farm Bill that has a lot of potential if funded to a proper level. The program was slow to develop after the 2002 bill was completed one reason being it was so different from anything we had seen before. The greatest benefit of the program is it addresses landowner's efforts to do an outstanding job of conserving natural resources above and even beyond the Farm Bill. A farmer that receives CSP benefits is operating at the highest level of conservation. However, there are problems. Budget constraints have limited the implementation of the program and it has been limited to a small number of watersheds across the country. It will be hard to find broad-base support for the program, as only a small number of producers have been eligible to participate. Where it has been implemented it has served as an incentive for producers to move to the next level of conservation and in many instances to move from a good conservationist to an outstanding conservationist.

A problem with the program other than limitations from lack of funding has been broad-based rules that have been hard to implement in many areas with special conditions. I would suggest a system much like EQIP and the local working groups. This would allow the locally led process to tailor the specifications to each area. Conservation district directors should take a lead in this effort.

The 2002 Farm Bill was a hallmark for conservation in the United States. It offers a mix of programs and resources to not only protect the productivity of farmers and ranchers today but also to insure our ability to produce into the future. There are ways to make the 2007 Farm Bill an even more effective piece of farm policy.

A discussion on conservation issues also has to include another topic, the financial security of our industry. It is important to note that even with all of the programs and technology that we can gather you can be assured that there will be no conservation in the country without agricultural profits. It is imperative that we address the financial considerations of our industry as we move toward new legislation or an extension of existing legislation.

The concepts of counter cyclical payments and flexibility planting in the 2002 Farm Bill are good ones. It provides a necessary safety net for producers during times of low prices and allows producers to farm for the market. These concepts should also be compatible with World Trade Organization (WTO) ideas to address competition in the world market without market distortion.

The only problem I see in the counter cyclical payment plan is a situation that has occurred here on the rolling plains a couple of times since the 2002 bill was implemented. We have seen a short wheat crop over a wide region of Texas that has been significant enough to cause prices to rise. Under those conditions, we see producers with no crop to sell and market prices high enough to cancel all counter cyclical payments. This brings about a worst-case scenario for the producer. If it is an individual situation this can be covered by federal crop insurance and would not be significant enough to cause the market to respond. If this situation is over a wide area it can affect the market. In these types of cases some sort of revenue assurance concept would better serve the producer. I think that the corn growers are advocating a plan similar to this.

As we get closer to bringing all of the components of the 2007 Farm Bill closer together there will be many ideas to consider. The bottom line is that this bill will be a compromise effort by many factions and budget considerations. It is essential that we look at the 2002 Farm Bill as a good starting point for discussion. With all of the uncertainties of the World Trade Organization talks and economic considerations we would be well served with a Farm Bill that contains many of the core ideas of the 2002 legislation.

Conservation efforts have been well served by the 2002 Farm Bill. We can do better and accomplish more by giving conservation district directors and producers the best tools available to continue to do the remarkable job that they embark on each day.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this statement before your Committee today. I am happy to answer any questions you or the Committee may have.

Barry Mahler - (Bio)

DOB: 4/9/50

Work:

1971-present – Farmer/Rancher (Wheat, Cotton, Stocker Cattle)

1997-present – Farm News Director for KAUZ TV in Wichita Falls, TX (CBS affiliate)

1993-present – Reporter for Farm Bureau Roundup (Weekly Farm Radio Program produced by Texas Farm Bureau)

Organizations:

Secretary of Wichita Soil & Water Conservation District Board

Secretary of Wichita County Farm Bureau Board

Vice-Chair of Wichita County FSA Committee

President of Texas Association of Soil & Water Conservation Districts

Education:

1968 graduate of Iowa Park High School

1998 BA in Communications from Midwestern State University, Wichita Falls, Texas

2000 MBA in Business & Finance from Midwestern State University

Family:

Wife: Sheri Mahler

Son: Braden Mahler (13)

Son: Matthew Mahler (9)

Church:

Member of First United Methodist Church in Iowa Park, Texas